

"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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THE RURAL CHURCH AND THE TENANT FARMER *

By Garland Reid Stafford

The rapid rise of farm tenancy has become a primary national problem. In 1880 one out of every four farmers was a tenant. Today, more than two out of every five farmers are tenants. If tenancy is a good thing, then we are making progress; if it is not good, we are not. There is a widespread opinion that the increase in tenancy is a real impediment to rural progress and much concern about it is being expressed.

The Church is among those concerned about this problem because it is concerned for the welfare of the tenant family. Almost universally the effect of tenancy on the tenant family is bad. The very insecurity of tenure contributes to this fact. More than one-third of all tenants in the South had occupied for less than one year the farms they were living on January 1, 1935. Only twenty-two per cent had been on the farms they occupied as much as from two to four years. In other words, seventy-eight per cent of all tenants in the South had occupied their present farms for less than four years. As Secretary Wallace points out, "The backbone of any enduring civilization is a hopeful, virile, energetic people who feel that they have a stake in the future worth working for.... There must be either an increased ownership or an increased security of tenure, or both." A tenant farmer, writing recently in one of the southern farm journals, said that this was the tragic part--the thing that keeps him awake, "My wife and I are already at the middle age of 44 years. When I get to where I can't carry on this.....proposition and before many years will have to move--what then? No provision for the future, not even burial insurance. We will have nowhere to go. In spite of all the hard work we have done and the improvements we have made, the landlord still has the deed to the property."

Tenancy also allows a lower standard of living than does ownership. It was estimated during the last decade that one-fifth of the landless families in North Carolina were living in one and two-room shacks. Dr. C. C. Taylor says that a similar condition prevails throughout the whole southern tenant area. There are natural reasons for this. The tenant who does not own a house cannot afford to improve it; the landlord who never expects to live there does not. The result--rural slums.

The standard of living is reflected also in the drudgery imposed on women who must do without most of the household conveniences and do manual labor in the fields in addition. The absence of conveniences runs in direct proportion to low tenure status. A survey in North Carolina revealed that eighty-nine per cent of the mothers in tenant families worked in the fields. Girls, participating in so little except the home life of their parents, and hoping to escape its monotony and tedium, marry young only to establish similar homes.

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Tenant families have a smaller budget than owner families to spend. For this reason most of their family expenditures must go for food and clothing. This leaves a much smaller amount to be spent for health, education, religion, recreation, etc. A system that produces such inequalities must be the concern of a church that stands for the democracy of Jesus Christ.

That tenancy is an evil is seen in the fact that it produces more than its share of criminals. Dr. H. W. McLaughlin is responsible for the statement that tenancy is the brood hen for the hatching and nurture of crime. He says, in part: "The Southern cities which lead the nation in homicides.....are cities which draw their population from the areas where tenancy is most prevalent. The most prolific source of criminality is found in the areas where the people are underprivileged in economics, proper housing, medical care, and religious opportunities."

Not only are tenants underprivileged in their religious opportunities, but they make less use than land owners of those they have. Dr. C. C. Taylor states that in every survey that has been made tenants attend religious services less and are less often members of the Church than are land-owners. The fact that renters move frequently may account for this situation.

The Gospel of Jesus teaches that all men are brothers. Tenancy develops a sort of class consciousness that denies this brotherhood. All too frequently the church is either a landlords' church or a tenants' church--not both. The feeling of inferiority and dependence on the part of tenants and the feeling of superiority and benevolence toward them on the part of owners, even when they meet at the church, is not calculated to improve this situation. Only through the confidence of ownership on the part of those once tenants can this social and economic breach be closed.

When the tenant tries to offset his religious disadvantage he sets up a church for those of his own station. Many times these churches are of erratic sects, led by untutored men. Depending, as they do, on ecstatic emotionalism, such sects have little to offer in the way of constructive program, and are of doubtful value in the moral and spiritual life of tenant communities. The more stable churches cannot but be concerned over a condition that alienates from them those they would serve.

The church is concerned for revenue in order that the religious needs of the community may be adequately satisfied. Here again tenancy produces more difficulty. Churches in predominately tenant areas are uniformly hampered for lack of funds. The typical tenant church is a one-room unattractive structure served by a pastor who has from two to six other churches to look after. Tenants cannot and do not contribute much to the church. In areas not predominately tenant, owner families contribute from twice to fifteen times as much as do tenant families. This has been borne out in studies in Iowa, Ohio, Missouri and elsewhere. The problem of support for churches in tenant areas cannot be solved by home mission boards. When the problem of tenancy is solved, it is reasonable to expect that the problem of church maintenance will largely disappear.

That the churches are becoming aroused over the problem of tenancy is seen in such recommendations as that of the National Conference on the Rural Church, held in Washington, D. C., in January, 1936, which declared: "We express

our judgment that there should be developed some practical plan by which the government can assist the tenant farmer to independent ownership of the farm he tills." The Rural Work Commission of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, calls attention, at length, to the seriousness of the situation in its Report Number One. The Report of the Rural Church Commission of the Western North Carolina Conference of this denomination, in 1936, declared: "We believe that tenancy is one of the chief social and economic evils of our Southland, that it fosters poverty, illiteracy, and criminality, that it is destructive of spiritual values in the tenant family, and that it is the source of much discontent and strife.....We pledge ourselves to encourage all legitimate movements that will enable tenants to become home-owners. We further pledge ourselves to a larger interest in and care for the shifting tenant families in the area of our conference."

Perhaps these last two sentences suggest some things the Church can do about the problem. While it is not desirable to abolish tenancy in toto, it is evident that there is entirely too much of it for the public welfare. Federal aid in helping tenants purchase land—a method not unlike that used successfully by Denmark and other European countries in dealing with this problem—is regarded by many as offering a solution. The magnitude of the problem is such that even if approximately \$90,000,000 were appropriated annually for this purpose, Secretary Wallace estimates it would take two hundred and thirty years to complete the job. Regardless of the magnitude of the task, however, the United States can help its tenants to ownership if it wants to do so. Whatever has been done elsewhere can be done here. This approach alone, though, will not eradicate the evils of the tenant system. Soil conservation programs, carried on by the tenant for which he will receive credit from the landlord (a method practiced in England) bears promise of help. Land speculation must be discouraged. Homestead tax exemption and graduated land tax laws which are designed to lighten the tax burden on small land-owners, are in the right direction. The church, as a powerful instrument for arousing and shaping public opinion, has a great opportunity to help lay this problem on the social conscience of the nation. Having done this, it can encourage the use of such remedies as those just mentioned, that have been found to be effective.

The church is a personal organization as well as a social force, however, and this phase of its usefulness here must not be overlooked. It must do something for the people who are tenants--the people by the millions who live in the areas of our churches year after year, as well as the system in which they are enthralled. Not long ago the editor of the "Progressive Farmer and Southern Ruralist" had this to say: "Into the area served by....." the average country church "there move every year from one to a hundred tenant families. The children are growing up without church or Sunday school influences. The father and mother perhaps would like to be invited to connect themselves with the nearby church and church people. But nobody ever extends such an invitation."

Let the local church anticipate moves of tenant families in the community, by recommending the outgoing family to the care of a church in their new location and by personally welcoming the new family into the community. The church people and the pastor are the ones to make the advances and the acquaintance of the new family.

Whenever and wherever the church finds a social and economic system that makes human life insecure, that produces a lower than decent standard of living,

that destroys hope and ambition, that condemns people to a perpetual drudgery and servitude, that denies to them a just share of this world's goods, that breeds and nourishes crime, that stifles spiritual and cultural yearnings, that cheapens the offices of religion, it must, for Christ's sake, do its utmost to help eradicate such conditions and reform the system that produces them. Since tenancy is characterized by all the evils mentioned, it would seem that the church must assume its responsibility to lay the matter on the conscience of the nation and to help formulate a policy of Christian statesmanship that will both reform the system of tenancy and help the tenants themselves avoid the evils natural to their situation.

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